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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: STRPCE STABLE, BUT TENSE AS PRESSURE FROM
PARALLEL GOVERNMENT MOUNTS

Classified By: Ambassador Tina S. Kaidanow for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) Summary. The Serb-majority municipality of Strpce continues - somehow - to function. The situation is unstable in that the parallel government persists in competing with legitimate structures, but for the time being the Kosovo Police Service and KFOR keep the peace. The parallel government controls most of the municipality's territory and continues to assert itself in policing illegal construction, as well as through attempts to control cadastral records and the municipal building itself. Strpce's parallel chief civil servant (CEO), Radica Grbic, tells us she is unhappy with the parallel government, believing that parallel mayor Zvonko Mihajlovic does not understand the predicament confronting Strpce's Serbs. Grbic continues to maintain contact with outside parties, including Strpce's Albanians, and she conveys messages to Mihajlovic on our behalf. UNMIK is unable to exert any authority in the municipality, nor is ICO an accepted interlocutor on the Serb side, leaving a political vacuum in helping to resolve this situation for the long term. We continue to exert our admittedly limited influence with key actors - most notably Belgrade's representatives in Kosovo - to keep things calm and prevent any escalation. The situation in Strpce is yet another example of how important it is to rationalize the international presence in Kosovo; i.e., to ensure a uniform and complete deployment of EULEX into all areas of Kosovo later this fall. In the absence of such a uniform deployment, the potential for uncertainty and violence in Strpce, as well as in other enclave locales, will only increase. End Summary.

Political Situation Confused

12. (C) The political situation in the Serb-majority municipality of Strpce remains confused, with no one faction or institution holding a preponderance of power. The Serb-only parallel municipal government, led by Zvonko Mihajlovic (Serbian Radical Party), continues to occupy certain offices in the municipal building. Workers -- both Serb and Albanian -- employed by the legitimate municipal government continue to occupy other offices in the municipal building as well. Strpce's police station remains open, and Kosovo Police Service (KPS) commander Dragan Ivanovic, along with his Serb officers, remain on the job and responsive to higher KPS command at the regional and central level. In

Albanian majority areas of the municipality, Beqir Fejzullahu, the top Kosovo Albanian vote-getter in Strpce in the November 17, 2007 municipal elections, serves as political leader of Strpce's Albanian minority.

Role of the KPS Key

¶3. (C) Most observers, including Strpce's parallel CEO Radica Grbic, who held the same position as the municipality's chief civil servant during the previous legitimate administration, agree that the Kosovo Serb KPS, backed by KFOR, is the most important factor maintaining Strpce's relative stability. UNMIK CIVPOL and USKFOR in the region tell us that KPS commander Ivanovic is advising Strpce residents of all ethnicities to file police reports with his officers if and when they have a complaint, rather than resorting to taking action themselves. Strpce CIVPOL monitor (and U.S. police officer) Teresa Pyle told us Sept. 3 that this has kept tensions low and reduced the number of complaints "because now that they have to write them down and sign them, people aren't making as many accusations as before."

Parallel Government Continues to Push the Envelope

¶4. (C) Amid the municipality's political and security complexities, parallel mayor Mihajlovic and his followers continue to assert authority in various ways, most visibly in their efforts to combat illegal construction and to gain access to cadastral records. Parallel government officials maintain a vehicle checkpoint at the entrance to the "Weekend

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Zone" area in Strpce in an effort to stop illegal construction there. This has led Albanians building homes in that zone to make periodic complaints to Embassy officials and to the press. During our September 3 conversation, Pyle showed us the checkpoint. She explained that it has been turning away trucks, prompting builders to hide construction materials in passenger cars, which originally were exempt from inspection. KPS regional command told USKFOR on September 18 that it was considering allowing the Strpce KPS -- vice the parallel government -- to man the checkpoint as long as legitimate municipal inspectors could be found to assist them.

¶5. (C) One factor holding tensions in check is the stable status quo that no one wants to disturb, a point that Commander Ivanovic made with USKFOR on September 18, describing Strpce as "manageable for now," given that nothing disruptive had occurred over the previous two weeks. Another factor may be a commonly-held opinion among both Strpce's Serbs and Albanians that illegal construction is a major problem requiring some sort of action. USKFOR reported on August 11 that Fejzullahu, Strpce's Albanian political leader, and others are outraged by the building, which is talking place in a national park. An article in the Albanian language daily Koha Ditore on September 17, while criticizing the parallel structures for operating an illegal checkpoint, also pointed out that Mihajlovic had "environmental" reasons for preventing construction there. (Note: Local residents of all ethnicities have griped about this problem for years, but even under the parallel government, construction continues largely unabated. End Note.)

¶6. (C) The situation is less stable regarding the dueling jurisdiction over control of the municipal cadastral records. Mihajlovic asserts his "government's" right to control the cadastral office in Strpce, and parallel officials have twice attempted to occupy the office, most recently on September 1. These attempts have raised tensions in the town. For example, Strpce residents, during the September 1 clash over cadastral records, called for the KPS to intervene and protect the office. The Cadastral Office now remains locked, and the KPS Regional Command in Ferizaj/Urosevac controls the keys. T

17. (C) Apart from the cadastral office itself, Mihajlovic has also said he wants to control the entire municipal building and all municipal functions. For the moment, the building remains divided between parallel officials and those still working for what remains of the legitimate municipal government, who are paid by the Kosovo central budget. These civil servants reported to USKFOR on September 18 that they were still under pressure from Mihajlovic to give the parallel government control over municipal taxation (including property taxes), among other things. KPS officers are now stationed at the building's entrance to prevent any flare-ups of violence. The civil servants continue to provide all Strpce residents with essential land records, birth certificates, and other documents essential to everyday life, thus preserving some elements of legitimate municipal government and helping the municipality to continue functioning.

CEO's View

18. (C) In speaking with Radica Grbic on September 3, we heard a great deal of frustration from her about the parallel government, which she believes "simply does not understand the position we (Strpce Serbs) are in." She also confirmed reports that Mihajlovic is portraying any small or incidental contact with international officials, including KFOR, as a sign of support for his parallel government's legitimacy, which in her opinion further illustrates his misunderstanding of the situation. As with many other more moderate Kosovo Serbs, Grbic expressed dismay at the results of the May 11 parallel elections, which resulted in parallel assemblies dominated by hardliners from the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS). She

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explained her continued presence in the parallel government as an attempt to maintain contacts with UNMIK, Strpce's Albanians, and the outside world. We asked her, and she agreed, to carry a message to Mihajlovic warning that his continued efforts to assert authority in Strpce could well provoke a violent confrontation that the international community would be hard-pressed to keep under control. On September 9, Grbic phoned to tell us that Mihajlovic heard our message but had no response, and insisted that we talk to him directly.

Ministry for Kosovo's Reaction

19. (C) On September 19, the Ambassador met with Serbian State Secretary for Kosovo Oliver Ivanovic and pressed him to restrain Mihajlovic. Ivanovic indicated he would counsel Mihajlovic to refrain from further provocative action. As a moderate politician, Ivanovic concurred with Grbic's opinion, expressing a great deal of frustration with the results of the parallel elections in Kosovo, pointing out that Mihajlovic "is after all, a member of the Radical Party," but noting that as a matter of Serbian state policy, support for the parallel municipal authorities in Strpce and throughout Kosovo would continue and indeed intensify.

Comment: Not Seeing Clearly

110. (C) Among the parallel authorities in Serb-majority areas in Kosovo, Strpce's poses the most serious challenge to date. We have received no indication that the Serbian government, through the Ministry for Kosovo -- the organization with the most potential influence in this situation -- is making any substantial effort to restrain the parallel mayor; indeed, they have previewed their intention to increase support to parallel authorities, no matter how politically distasteful these Radical administrations may be to a DS-led Belgrade government. We have made the potential consequences of continued provocations by the parallel authorities quite clear to Belgrade's representatives in Kosovo, and we continue, together with USKFOR, to exert practical influence

on the ground where possible to encourage restraint and good sense. The situation in Strpce is yet another example of how important it is to rationalize the international presence in Kosovo; i.e., to ensure a uniform and complete deployment of EULEX into all areas of Kosovo. In the absense of such a uniform deployment, the potential for uncertainty and violence in Strpce, as well as in other enclave locales, will only increase. End Comment.
KAIDANOW